

Side Brown

Matthew Sweet, who plays the Chestnut Cabaret Tuesday has a new album Girlfriend (Zoo) that has a much harder yet more appealing edge than his earlier efforts. The music has a more down-to-earth sound which contrasts quite well with his pleasant vocals. Sweet plays several instruments on each track, but the feel is spontaneous, a good deal of which can be attributed to the soulful, gritty guitar of Richard Lloyd.

Lyricaly, Sweet's songs are nothing special and his singing is rarely varied, but there's a consistent feel through the album. An exception to the sameness in the vocals is "Your Sweet Voice," which the Everly Brothers should cover. "Does She Talk," is the funkier track, propelled by Robert Quine's bluesy guitar. Other strong songs include "Holy War," "Divine Intervention" and "Evangeline."

Girlfriend certainly moves Matthew Sweet into the category of artists to keep an eye on. He'll be joined at his show by Richard Lloyd, which makes it even more enticing.

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On A Winter's Night features folky singer-songwriters Christine Lavin, David Wilcox and Patti Larkin at the Keswick in Glenside, Saturday.

Apparently a certain crew of folk-type singer-songwriters are real into seasons because a new album, When October Goes (Autumn Love Songs) recently appeared on Philo. It's all very tasteful with flannel shirt type songs that make you wanna gather pine cones in the woods, then drink tea by the fire while listening to N.P.R.. The best cut is Cheryll Wheeler's, "When Fall Comes to New England." (Wheeler will be in town soon appearing with Tom Rush at the University

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Museum.) Also good is "The Return" by Sally Fingerett with a beautiful string arrangement.

Patti Larkin, who has one cut on that album has a new album Tango (High Street). Easily the most intense performer at this show, her emotional subject matter cuts deeper than say, Lavin who writes songs about shopping malls and Dolly Parton's hair. Larkin also has unique arrangements based around her very good acoustic guitar playing. There are quite a few standouts, like "Used to Be" and "Chained to These Lovin' Arms," but the most powerful is "Metal Drums" a song about toxic waste poisoning a town.

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The reissuing of great old albums on CD has resulted in many artists having more than one new album out at once. Such is the case with Bill Monroe, who has the newly recorded, Crying Holy Unto the Lord (MCA) and Mule Skinner Blues (RCA Heritage). Mule Skinner Blues are the first recordings of Monroe's Blue Grass Boys, made in 1940 and '41. This was the pre-banjo Blue Grass Boys, with the dominant instruments being Tommy Magness' fiddle and Monroe's mandolin, so the sound is more old-timey than bluegrass. But the elements are there, particularly in the speeded up versions of two Jimmie Rodgers songs, the title track, "Blue Yodel Number 7" as well as "Dog House Blues," a cousin to Roy Acuff's "Freight Train Blues." The harmonies are a bit more down to earth and closer to gospel and the Carter Family than they would become later, though Monroe has continued to due gospel tunes throughout his career. There are several songs that Monroe

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would record again as his music changed such as "In the Pines." Beautifully packaged, with detailed notes, this traces the beginnings of an American musical genius.

The title track of Monroe's new album is also on the earlier album and the contrast is fascinating. Monroe just turned 80 and has been ill with cancer for years, but it hasn't stopped him. In fact his singing here is much stronger than on his last effort and his mandolin playing is still solid. The entire album is gospel tunes and features guests including Ricky Skaggs, The Osborne Brothers, Mac Wiseman, Jim and Jesse, and Ralph Stanley whose vocal is on his brother Carter's "Harbor of Love" is one of the highlights. When he and Monroe hit the high harmony, it goes right down your spine. Other standouts include Skaggs' vocal on "You're Drifting Away," the Osborne Brothers on "Just Over in Glory Land," and Mac Wiseman on "This World Is Not My Home," on which Woody Guthrie based his song, "I Ain't Got No Home."

Monroe sings only one lead, "Baptize Me in the Cumberland River," and while his voice wavers a bit, he can still hit his famous falsetto and his harmonies on the other songs are still spooky and mind-blowing. His perseverance in the face of age and illness is truly inspiring as is the music on this album.

A really excellent look at bluegrass in the '50s can be found on The Best of Bluegrass Vol. 1: Standards (Mercury). This has 22 songs by some of the greatest bluegrass musicians including several classics such as "Down in the Willow Gardens" by the Osborne Brothers and Red Allen which is worth the price alone. They also do another good tune "Once  
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More," and their hit "Ruby" (minus Red Allen). There are also standouts from the Stanley Brothers, Carl Story and the Country Gentlemen as well as "Feudin' Banjos" by Arthur Smith with Don Reno which makes Eric Weissberg's "Duelin' Banjos" look sick. Also included is the original version of "Foggy Mountain Breakdown" by Flatt and Scruggs "Cora Is Gone," with Lester Flatt doing one of his best vocals. Each song seems to get faster and each harmony higher as the album goes on. If you want to find out what bluegrass is really about, this is it. The only thing wrong with it is that despite informative notes by Ben Sandmel, there are few dates provided for the actual recordings.

Mercury has also issued a "Best of" series on several country artists, including George Jones who did some of his greatest work for the label. Since there at least 50 Best of George Jones Volume Ones, this is aptly subtitled Hardcore Honky Tonk. This is Jones at his early best, when he still was influenced by Western Swing and had youthful spunk. That spunk turned into something just as valid as he got older, but there's no denying the joy of such cuts as "If I Don't Love You (Grits Ain't Groceries)" or his first hit "Why Baby Why." His famous mournful quality is captured on "Hearts In My Dream" and (the rare) "Relief Is Just a Swallow Away," while the harmonies on "The Last Town I Painted" show a bluegrass influence.

Several of Jones' greatest songs such as "Color of the Blues," "Window Up Above," and "Accidentally On Purpose" are included as well as lesser known tunes such as "You Better Treat Your Man Right" and "Out of Control." This is easily one of the best George Jones

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collections yet released and the sound quality is superb.

Jones recently switched from Epic to MCA, and his first for the label *And Along Came Jones* is a return to form. Though Jones made some first-rate recordings for Epic (he can't help it), he was produced by the notorious Billy Sherrill, a man who went on record as hating country music (though he did know how to record pedal steel). On the new album, the production is fairly straightforward, and the songs while not being stellar are a vast improvement on his recent work for Epic. The standout ballad is "Angels Don't Fly," while "Honky Tonk Myself to Death" is standard upbeat Jones with touches of rockabilly.

The album's first hit is "You Couldn't Get the Picture," a weeper about a guy coming home and finding his wife gone, but she left message all over the house on post it notes. It's totally silly in the Nashville tradition and Jones who's a master at such stuff makes it believable. The most revealing track is "You Done Me Wrong," a country standard Jones cut for United Artists about 30 years ago. This version is so close to the original it's amazing and easily his most traditional recording in years. Jones fans will enjoy the new album, but if you want to find out why he is the greatest all-time country singer, get *Hardcore Honky Tonk*.